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ABSTRACT

Currently, California education leaders face the task of implementing and sustaining proven practices that increase student achievement. Teachers who are able to sustain change in their classroom practices possess purpose for the cause for improving student learning, passion for implementing quality instruction, and conviction to stay focused over extended time. Principals who sustain reform efforts lead schools with vibrant climates and cultures that exhibit these qualities. This paper reports on how these three traits were used in transforming Lee Richmond School, California, from an underperforming school into an example of educational success. A core leadership team for instruction was established that promoted a sense of purpose in the faculty. The principal, in becoming teacher, learner, and coach, helped instill a sense of passion in the faculty that their work matters and that, as their expertise increases, so the importance of their work. By encouraging reflective conversations among the faculty, the principal helped bolster the conviction that their reforms were taking effect. By making purpose, passion, and conviction permanent parts of the school culture, the school's reform efforts were ensured. (RT)

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Purpose, Passion and Conviction: Three Traits that Matter Most When the Going Gets Tough in Instructional Reform.

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Purpose, Passion and Conviction

Three Traits that Matter Most When the Going Gets Tough in Instructional Reform

Nancy L. Akhavan

Currently, California education leaders face the task of implementing and sustaining proven practices that increase student achievement. School leaders can mandate new programs, but they cannot mandate traits that matter in sustaining change: purpose, passion, or conviction. Leaders create these traits. Teachers who implement effective teaching methods over time improve student achievement. Teachers who are able to sustain change in their classroom practices possess purpose for the cause, passion for implementing quality instruction, and conviction to stay focused over extended time. Principals who sustain reform efforts lead schools with vibrant climates and cultures that exhibit these qualities.

Purpose

The development of purpose begins with the principal but ends with teacher commitment. Principals create purpose through shared understanding of why instruction needs to change. The principal, teachers, and support staff discuss student achievement by looking at test scores, examining instructional practices, and evaluating student work samples. Questions asked include: "How do our students rank in relation to state standards?" "How do our students rank in relation to other schools in the district, in the

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state?" Most importantly the staff reflects on the answers raised by examining the data. The staff collectively asks, "What does this mean for us, for our students? For our instructional practices?" Together the staff examines student achievement data to understand why instructional changes need to be made. By participating cooperatively in discussion based upon student work together, the principal and staff develop a common purpose.

Lee Richmond School in Hanford, California was identified as an under-performing school according to Public School Accountability Act of 1999 (California Department of Education, 1999). As outlined in legislation, the first year of reform began with a planning year coordinated by an external evaluator. During this year student data were analyzed and discussed in broad terms, but during the first year of implementation the staff cooperatively asked more difficult questions of themselves, like: "What can be done to change? To improve?"

A core leadership team for instruction was established. The team was compromised of seven teachers, the learning director, the literacy coach, and the principal. The team discussed data including the SAT 9 examination, the New Standards Reference examination, and teacher collected reading samples. More questions were raised about what the scores meant to the teachers, what the scores meant in relation to the instructional practices that were in place the previous year, and what goals the staff wanted to focus on for the new school year. The principal provided the opportunity to discuss the curriculum and instructional model that was implemented and provided the vision for sustaining the implementation.

In the beginning, the teachers stated that they felt suffocated by district expectations to change initiatives. They did not feel ownership of the instructional strategies and did not possess the energy to continue. The school culture did not support the efforts of the teachers. In order to turn the suffocating atmosphere around the principal implemented grade-level collaboration meetings where the staff could vent frustrations and celebrate successes. Together they challenged the mental models they held about the purpose for change and created new mental models. (Senge, 2000). The staff internalized purpose for changing instruction and developed shared understanding of why they chose to keep moving toward the targeted teaching models.

Passion

Principals create passion among staff members by changing their role with teachers. The principal becomes active in the instructional practices of the school. In essence, the principal becomes part of the moment of instruction, a moment that traditionally only had two participants, teacher and learner. The principal takes on a third role: coach. The principal changes the traditional role that the position garners in the organization and focuses on providing precise and concrete feedback to the teacher about student work and the implementation of instruction.

Nothing matters more than a qualified, passionate teacher who understands the relationship between good instruction and student learning. (Haycock, 2001). Teaching requires more didactic and analytic expertise than in the past. Teachers now need to understand student learning in depth to know if students are below, at, or near standards and what instructional strategies best advance student academic ability.

To develop this expertise teachers need to work in a climate that fosters adult learning and provides significant opportunities to be coached. The principal as coach leads the teacher to new learning in extremely specific ways. The principal must possess the expertise to clearly understand and interpret effective practices in reading, writing and mathematics instruction. The principal becomes part of the instructional moment by actively participating with the teacher in the analysis of instruction and subsequent reflection of quality. The coach and teacher must actively engage in discussion around student work which asks, "Was the instruction powerful?" "Did the student work improve as a result of the instruction?"

The principal changes his or her traditional role with the teachers because there is no one set answer to the question, "Just tell me what to do, and I will do it." A scripted program is not going to create passion with teachers. A scripted program, or comprehensive reform model, that does not improve the expertise of the teacher, and the expertise of the administrator to deliver professional development, will not sustain increases in student achievement over time (Pogrow, 2001). Teacher quality is the most significant contributing factor to student achievement (Haycock, 2001).

The principal, learning director, literacy coach and teachers at Lee Richmond school worked together to implement effective teaching strategies that were new to the teachers. The focus of the instructional strategies for language arts was the Readers and Writers Workshop. At the beginning of the school year the principal coached the implementation of writers workshop in the classroom of one third grade teacher. The principal modeled mini-lessons and taught alongside the teacher during the course of five weeks. During the five week period the principal and teacher discussed the instruction,

student writing samples, and the change in the quality of the writing in relation to the instruction. The teacher was the focus of this coaching cycle. With continued support the teacher sustained the new teaching method throughout the entire school year.

Coaching teaching staff, and making the coaching relationship an integral function of how business gets done at a school creates passion among the entire staff. At Lee Richmond the focus continues to be improving student achievement through rigorous and demanding work while developing teacher expertise. The coaching environment fosters a spirit of teamwork that bolsters the participation and endurance of the entire staff to focus on implementing effective practices.

Conviction

What you believe you will see, you will see. Sustaining change in teaching practices is difficult for staff engrained in delivering instruction in ways that are comfortable for them, whether or not the instruction is good for children. Of all the qualities important to reform efforts, conviction matters most. When teachers have conviction, they will provide purpose for themselves and foster passion in fellow teachers. The teachers learn that students from diverse backgrounds can succeed with a challenging curriculum that demands more of students and of teachers than ever before. Katy Haycock (2001) writes that providing students with a rigorous curriculum, aligned to standards, makes a difference in closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and higher socioeconomic students.

Principals bolster conviction with reflective conversations regarding what actions were and can be taken to improve instruction and how these actions effect student work. The reflective conversation is the follow-up from the coaching phase. The staff must be

involved in reflective conversations individually, with a coach, with grade level team members, cross-grade level team members, or among teachers from the entire site. The purpose of the reflective conversation is to identify what instructional strategies actually improved student achievement, how the teacher felt about implementing the strategy, and how to sustain the use of the strategy as part of the teacher's repertoire. Conversations reinforce experiences that the teachers have with implementing the strategies. In time, teachers begin to infect other staff members with new ideas and example of what works with instruction. School personnel that work and reflect in teams have greater success in spreading instructional successes quickly among the ranks of the staff (Fullan, 1999). Adults learn best in an atmosphere of community. Adult learning strengthens the conviction for changing instructional practices among the entire staff.

The staff at Lee Richmond School collaborated openly in grade level team meetings and in coaching follow up conferences. Together the teachers worked through problems openly and constructively while discussing what instructional strategies worked and what did not work. The conversations established a culture of reflective inquiry. Many times the staff stated that listening to each other, facing the actual results of their instructional practices, was painful. They also stated that while this experience was painful, it was essential to learn how to teach differently.

During the second year of the implementation of the schools program improvement plan, the core leadership team designed a staff needs survey which addressed the professional development needs of the teachers. Questions on the survey revolved around the two focus areas of reading and writing workshop. The teachers and

principal analyzed the results of the survey and a course of action was planned in order to meet the teachers needs in deep and specific ways.

Sustaining Reform

Reform efforts are sustained when purpose, passion and conviction are continually reinforced. These qualities address a key part of any reform movement – adult learning. When a school site organization develops a common purpose for change the mental models held by the staff about how students learn are challenged. The principal coaches teachers, the principal changes the traditional role of the school leader and affects the school culture by infusing teamwork and learning. Changing the culture of the school nurtures passion among teachers. When teachers participate in reflective conversations and staff members challenge their mental models of student ability, the staff begins to develop conviction to each other and to their goals. Overall, purpose, passion and conviction address how the teachers feel about the instructional practices they work to implement in their classrooms. Many reform efforts die before it is clear whether expectations were actually implemented, or if new teaching strategies had any effect on student achievement.

Michael Fullan (1993) identified two critical conclusions about the failure of reform. First, the core culture of teaching and learning is extremely difficult to change. Second, change in teaching for more effective learning requires a major transformation in the culture of the school. Developing purpose, passion and conviction are three qualities that worked at sustaining instructional improvement at one school in central California

over a two -year period. As the school moved into the third year of implementation the teaching staff was a cohesive team working together. The team had conviction and conviction matters when the going gets tough.

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